

VZCZCXRO4040
PP RUEHPA RUEHTRO
DE RUEHNK #0682/01 3231901
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 181901Z NOV 08
FM AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7846
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHDO/AMEMBASSY DOHA PRIORITY 0256
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0305
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID PRIORITY 1861
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 0636
RHMFISS/COMSOCEUR VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY
RHMFISS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE PRIORITY
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY
RUEHDS/USMISSION USAU ADDIS ABABA PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0750
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 0375

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NOUAKCHOTT 000682

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/18/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [EAGR](#) [ECON](#) [ELTN](#) [MR](#)

SUBJECT: THE DEEP SOUTH POST-COUP: THE MORE THINGS CHANGE...

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Dennis Hankins for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Since the August 6 military-led overthrow of President Abdallahi, political and economic conditions in the south of Mauritania have remained largely unchanged, according to numerous community leaders. Politically, most community leaders showed tacit approval for the coup, with only one deputy mayor expressing a strong anti-coup position. Economically, the situation remains as dire as ever. The military junta has enacted a few measures, such as price controls, to provide some temporary relief for the populace, but the overall economic picture remains one of grinding poverty and underinvestment. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) A three-person Embassy/USAID team traveled to the far south of Mauritania November 10-12 to assess the political and economic climate in the region since the August 6 coup. (Note: The team also assessed the refugee situation SEPTTEL. End Note.) The team visited community leaders in the towns of Rosso, Boghe, and Kaedi, and the villages of Jidr El Mohguen, N'Tekane, and M'Bagne. All of these towns and villages lie either directly on the Senegal River or a short distance from it. The team had intended to meet primarily mayors, but in town after town, was informed that the mayor had "just left" for Nouakchott. Consequently, the team met with only one mayor, and several deputy mayors, secretaries general, and town councils. Comment: Unconfirmed reports indicate that mayors from around the country were called to Nouakchott during this time by a ministerial commission to hear the plans for the upcoming "national dialogue on democracy." Many of these mayors are in remote communities, making a trip to Nouakchott a serious undertaking. If the reports are true, this indicates a concerted effort by the High State Council to ensure a broad participation of political players for the "national dialogue on democracy." End Comment.

The political situation -- same as it ever was

¶3. (C) Most community leaders indicated that there had been little or no change at all in the political situation since the military coup of August 6, with things muddling along as they had before. In any event, most leaders indicated that such political matters were beyond their concern. As the Secretary General of Rosso El Hadj M'Bodj stated, "all of the intrigue is in Nouakchott," and his residents have more pressing concerns like feeding their families. This was a

recurring theme among the people the team spoke with.

¶4. (C) Tacit support of the military regime: The personal political positions of the community leaders were by and large subtly pro-coup. Leaders never stated outright that they supported the coup or General Aziz. Rather, they made statements that implied a tacit support for General Aziz's "rectification" or they referred to President Abdallahi's "blocking" of democratic institutions. Only in one community (Jidr El Mohguen) was there an overt display of support for the military junta, where General Aziz's portrait was prominently displayed in every office. "We are disciplined here", the mayor Cheikh Ould Mouloud said, to the quiet laughter of the other Mauriticians gathered. However, even this mayor never explicitly stated his personal position with respect to the military junta, and at no time on the trip did EmbOffs receive a litany of past wrongdoings by President Abdallahi or a blatant towing of the "party line" that is so frequently espoused in the press in Nouakchott.

¶5. (C) A lone anti-coup voice: Only one community leader, the deputy mayor of Boghe N'Diaye Djibril, took a strong anti-coup position, but he was careful to point out that it was his own personal opinion. (Comment: A few community leaders in other locales took a cautious middle-of-the-road position, but seemed to subtly lean towards the anti-coup camp as well. End Comment.) He said that it took a certain amount of courage to undertake the initiatives that Abdallahi had begun, such as building national unity and addressing the refugee issue. Things had appeared to be progressing in a positive manner, according to him, and then suddenly a coup

NOUAKCHOTT 00000682 002 OF 003

happened. People didn't understand why there was a coup, he said; it was unexpected. As the conversation moved to more sensitive topics, he closed and locked the door to his office and turned on the air conditioning to provide background "cover" noise. Becoming more animated and gesturing forcefully, he said Mauritania needed to develop a durable democracy that wasn't susceptible to coups and clan rivalries. He went on to say "we are tired of this clan-based system," and that "every general will eventually be president" if this system continues. He stressed that Mauriticians do not have a history of democratic processes and traditions to look back on, which leads to a lack of political awareness and maturity among the populace -- a sentiment echoed by others during this trip as well. Comment: As noted above, this deputy mayor was the only person to declare a firm position one way or another regarding the coup. However, the fact that he saw the need to close the door and provide background noise when discussing his personal anti-coup views indicates a reluctance to voice them too loudly lest they be overheard. End Comment.

¶6. (C) Diverse town councils: The composition of town councils was diverse. For example, in Jidr El Mohguen, the council consisted of 16 advisors, of which 4 were women, while in Kaedi, there were 21 advisors, 5 of which were women. The mayor in Jidr El Mohguen Cheikh Ould Mouloud was especially proud of his council, stressing that all ethnic groups were represented, and teachers, intellectuals, and engineers figured among the council. Political party representation showed the most diversity, a byproduct of the myriad parties present in Nouakchott. For example, the Boghe town council contained members from APP, RFD, UFP, Alternative (Badil), ADIL, AJD/MR, and PLEJ. Comment: Despite the smorgasbord of political parties represented in many towns and villages, this does not necessarily indicate a well-developed political scene. In fact, several community leaders stated that the population at large (and the political parties themselves) only cares about politics in their town when a campaign is underway. End Comment.

The economic situation -- still precarious

¶17. (C) Overall, the economic situation remains as dire as ever in the south. Although the High State Council has taken some temporary measures, particularly during Ramadan, to lower prices for necessities such as fuel, rice, and cooking oil, there is no sign that these measures will lead to any sort of sustained relief for the population. Community leaders overwhelmingly stated that they have not seen any significant change in the economic situation since the August 6 coup.

¶18. (C) The challenges: When asked to name the primary economic challenges that their communities face, the same problems were heard again and again: food security and transportation. Food security was at the top of the list. Agricultural practices were in need of modernization to enable people to move beyond hand-to-mouth subsistence farming. Although the south was the "breadbasket of Mauritania," according to several mayors, lack of investment hindered the region from realizing its full agricultural potential.

¶19. (C) Transportation problems were the second economic challenge most frequently cited. These problems stem from the fact that the road from Rosso to Boghe is almost wholly unpaved dirt track, making travel slow in the best of times, and nearly impossible during the rainy seasons. Several leaders cited paved roads as the key to economic development, with the mayor of Jidr El Mohguen eagerly anticipating the completion of a paved road in January that will lead from Rosso to the turn-off for his village. The secretary general of Rosso stressed that although his town is a provincial capital and a major waypoint for travelers between Mauritania and Senegal, the main roads in the center of the town were dirt that turned to mud during the rainy season, impeding commerce and generally making a mess of things.

NOUAKCHOTT 00000682 003 OF 003

Praise For U.S. Presidential Elections

¶10. (C) Many of the meetings ended with a brief discussion of the recent U.S. presidential elections. (Note: These discussions were frequently initiated by the Mauritians themselves. End Note.) Without exception, Mauritians were full of praise and admiration. "Thank you for the great lesson in democracy that you have given us," was one representative sentiment. They praised the ability of the U.S. to move past the racial problems of the past and to select "the best man for the job." Comment: This popular sentiment mirrors editorials in the local press, which have been almost unanimously congratulatory to the United States, and excited by the prospect of a man of African descent in the White House. End Comment.

Comment

¶11. (C) The south remains Mauritania's most-populated and poorest region of the country. This is a situation that is unlikely to change anytime soon, especially given the numerous international development projects in the south that have been put on hold since the August 6 coup. Politically, community leaders are in a precarious position -- taking a strong anti-coup stand risks cutting off what little assistance the central government provides to their towns. Principled stands are hard to take when basic survival needs are at stake. Consequently, a cautious "wait and see" attitude seems to prevail among community leaders. Although there is tacit support for the military junta, what most leaders really want to see is increased investment and development in their regions that will provide food security

for their people. Nevertheless, pro-coup and anti-coup leaders alike expressed hope for an overhaul of the Mauritanian political system that would lead to a stable democracy and sustained economic development, offering a glimmer of hope that democratic principles have taken some root among the political class.

HANKINS